

THE GENERATION OF THE TOWER AND A TOWERING GENERATION

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1. In this morning's Sidra we read of the generation of Noah and the evil lives they lead. Their punishment, as it is recorded in the Torah, was complete destruction - except for Noah and his family - in the great Flood. Following that episode, we read of another generation following in the footsteps of the first. This is the DOR HA'HAFLAGAH - the Generation of the Tower. The people of this generation had evidently failed to learn from the tragic lesson that its predecessors had been taught. They were a people marked by arrogance and haughtiness. (Summarize story of the Gen. of the Tower). Remember, friends, that the Torah does not describe merely poetic myths. We have substantial corroboration of that episode from the science of archeology. We know that the Mesopotamians of about 3,600-3,800 years ago began to dwell in big cities and in them to build tremendous pagan temples. These temples were constructed as high towers as a sign of the equality of the builders with the pagan gods they worshipped. In their writings, some of which we still have, they boast of building into the heavens, even as is recorded in today's Sidra, (See Kasuto Me'Noach ad Avraham for all this information). At the turn of the present century the very tower of which the Bible speaks was discovered, in ruins, by a German archeological expedition. It was clearly an impressive and imposing structure. These tremendous towers served both to express and inspire these Babylonians to imagine themselves a superior race, a "herrenvolk". Ultimately, the cities and the towers were destroyed and ~~the~~ all further construction was frustrated. If later today you will reread that part of this morning's portion, you will observe the terrific sarcasm with which the Torah describes the entire episode. Just one example: the name BAVEL (or Babel or Babylon) given to that place by G-d. This is a sarcastic pun, because the Mesopotamians themselves called their city Babel because in their language the name was derived from the words BAB*ILLI, meaning the **Gate** of the God - -or in the plural, BAB-ILANI meaning the **Gate** of the Gods (whence: Babylon). However, in Hebrew the name BABEL is similar to the root BALOL which means: confusion. So that the Torah tells us that what these mortals thought was their gate to their own godness was nothing more than the confusion of their poor minds.
2. And yet, despite the sarcasm and bitterness and ridicule which the Torah heaps upon this Generation of the Tower, the indictment of this generation is not complete. Just compare these two generations, that of the flood and that of the Tower: the Generation of the Flood was, with the exception of Noah and his family, completely and utterly destroyed; the generation of the Tower was not destroyed at all - it was merely punished by internal dissension and great exile and dispersion. Why is it that the generation of the Tower was treated with such comparative leniency despite their sins of arrogance ?
3. Our Rabbis gave us the ~~el~~ answer, based upon a clue in the Bible itself. Our Torah mentions VAYEHI KOL HAARETZ SAFAH ACHASS - all the world was one language, meaning of course that there was unity, cooperation, friendship. And therefore, DOR HAMABUL AL YEDEI SHEHAYU SHETUFIM BEGEZEL LO NISHTAIRA MEIHEM PLEITAH, AVAL EILU AL YEDEI SHEHAYU OHAVIM ZEH ES ZEH NISHTAYRAH MEIHEM PLEITAH.....there is something that can be salvaged from the Gen. of the Tower, something of lasting and permanent value, and that is: love, friendship. What our Rabbis got from this episode of the Gen. of the Tower was that every generation can become a Towering Generation if it learns that love; that even if people are arrogant and G-dless and criminal, they can escape heavenly wrath if they will learn to love G-d's creatures. The only way of NISHTAIRA MEIHEM PLEITAH, of surviving a world of coldness and treachery and mass-production and bold projects which obscure the individual is through AHAVAH.
4. It is told that a Jew once asked his Rabbi (See Newman, Hassidic Anthology p 223) why we say Le'Chayyim before reciting blessing over wine or schnapps, isn't it disrespectful to bless neighbor before we bless G-d. Rabbi showed him passage that we are enjoined to accept Mitzvah V'ahavta lereicha kamocho before vahavta es ha'shem elokecha, hence....
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5. Now, we frequently speak of the Mitzvah of neighborly love, and yet we usually fail to understand it - and therefore to practice it. The difficulty is a simple one: some people are simply unloveable. You ask me to have real affection for so-and-so? How can I, when I think he is repulsive? or, how can I when I simply don't approve of him and what he thinks and what he does? I am critical of so many things about him, and I refuse to surrender the right to be critical of him; it is part of a man's rational make-up to be critical. And if I don't approve of him and have no emotional ties to him, how can I possibly observe the commandment to love him?
6. That is a good question, which you have no doubt thought of, and which we must be able to answer if we will ever succeed in making of ourselves, who have so many of the faults and evil traits of the Gen. of the Tower, a Towering Generation, if we are to manage to survive as decent human beings and good Jews.
7. A most profound and adequate answer is the one suggested by that great German Jew, R. Samson Raphael Hirsch. Hirsch makes the observation that the Torah does NOT say V'ahavta ES Ha'ishim ele reiacha kamocho - love your neighbor - but LE'reiacha...which is difficult to translate, but which means love to your neighbor as yourself. What mean? ES reiacha implies an emotional tie, a complete and uncritical love of your neighbor, which may be very good but not usually possible. Rather, LE'reiacha ... don't have to approve of him or anything he says or wants, but what is required is EMPATHY, meaning: put yourself in his place, so that you will participate in his feelings in whatever happens TO him - that is LE'reiacha - share in what happens to him. If great good fortune happens to him - be happy for him, as if it happened to you. ~~If~~ Don't begrudge it and don't be indifferent. If tragedy occurs to him - share his sorrow and feel it as if it happened TO YOU - LE'reiacha kamocho. And when you can establish that identification and deeply participate in both his joys and his sorrows, then you will be certainly moved to increase the joys and alleviate the sorrows. You need agree to nothing he says and may even consider his personality faulty - but he is a human being with feelings and sensitivity, and the Mitzvah of Neighborly Love requires you to consider those feelings AS IF THEY WERE YOUR OWN. The Torah asks nothing of us that is beyond our capabilities. It does not ask of us to be uncritical in accepting confidantes or friends, It does not ask of us that we gush in sweetness over someone we loathe. It does say that no matter what our opinions of a person, we must have that much love in our souls that we feel not only for him - not only SYMPATHY - but as if we were him - EMPATHY.
(Can add: that's why Gemarrah in Sanhedrin Bror Lo Misha Yafah from V'ahavta....)
8. This demand of the Torah that we practice neighborly love is not a demand to be an angel. It is a challenge to be human. Few of us find it possible to approve of any one person completely and uncritically. Few of us can form deep emotional attachments with everyone we know. But all of us were created in the Image of G-d. And that means that we can practice neighborly love LE'reiacha, we can learn Empathy, we can consider another's feelings as if they were our very own. For that is the meaning of the Torah's commandment - it is practicable, manly and supremely human.
9. It is that and that alone which can make us the PLEITAH, the survivors in this generation, which like the one mentioned in today's Sidra, is feverishly busy in building all kinds of structures and weapons and industries and deriving therefrom the collective arrogance that makes us think we are supermen. The Generation of the Tower was a wicked one and therefore doomed to failure. But their one redeeming feature, AHAVAH, is that which is able to make of us and every other generation - a Towering Generation. May that be G-d's will.